Using Clear Pronouns

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When speaking with one another, we make eye contact, use hand gestures, and change our speech patterns (voice modulation, rate of speech, etc.) to make our meaning clear. When communicating through writing, we have only the words on the page to make our meaning clear. One of the most common mistakes writers make is not making pronoun references clear.

Pronouns substitute for nouns; they are a kind of shorthand. In a sentence like After Andrew intercepted the ball, he kicked it as hard as he could, the pronouns he and it substitute for the nouns Andrew and ball. The word a pronoun refers to is called its antecedent.

Ambiguous pronoun reference occurs when the pronoun could refer to two possible antecedents. Examples:

   When Gloria set the pitcher on the glass-topped table, it broke.

Here we can see that we don’t know if it refers to the table breaking or the pitcher breaking. It is unclear.

   Tom told James that he had won the lottery.

Who won the lottery—Tom or James? The revisions below eliminate the ambiguity.

   The pitcher broke when Gloria set it on the glass-topped table.

   Tom told James, “You have won the lottery.”

Remote pronoun reference occurs when a pronoun is too far away from its antecedent for easy reading.

   After the court ordered my ex-husband to pay child support, he refused. Approximately eight months later, we were back in court. This time the court ordered him to make payments directly to the Support and Collections Unit, which would in turn pay me. For the first six months, I received regular payments, but then they stopped. Again he was summoned to appear in court; but he did not respond.

The pronoun he was too distant from its antecedent, ex-husband, which appeared several sentences earlier.

Generally, avoid broad reference of this, that, which, and it.
For the sake of clarity, the pronouns this, that, which, and it should ordinarily refer to specific antecedents rather than to whole ideas or sentences. Either replace the pronoun with a noun or supply its antecedent.

   More and more often, especially in large cities, we are finding ourselves victims of serious crimes. We learn to accept our fate with minor grips and groans.

For clarity, the writer substituted the noun fate for the pronoun this, which referred broadly to the idea expressed in the preceding sentence.
Romeo and Juliet were both too young to have acquired much wisdom, which accounts for their rash actions.

The writer added an antecedent (fact) that the pronoun which clearly refers too.

**Do not use a pronoun to refer to an implied antecedent.**
A pronoun must refer to a specific antecedent, not to an implied word.

After braiding Ann’s hair, Sue decorated them with ribbons.

Modifiers, such as possessives, cannot serve as antecedents. A modifier may strongly imply the noun that the pronoun might logically refer to, but it is not itself that noun.

In Euripides’ Media, he describes the plight of a woman rejected by her husband.

**Avoid the indefinite use of they, it, and you.**
Do not use the pronoun they to refer indefinitely to people who have not been specifically mentioned. They should always refer to a specific antecedent.

Sometimes a list of ways to save energy is included with the gas bill. For example,

The gas company suggests setting a moderate temperature for the hot water heater.

The word it should not be used indefinitely in constructions such as “it is said on television…” or “In the article it says that…”

In the report it points out that lift the ban on Compound 1080 would prove detrimental, possibly even fatal, to the bald eagle.

The pronoun you is appropriate when the writer is addressing the reader directly: Once you have kneaded the dough, let it rise in a warm place for at least twenty-five minutes.

Except in very informal contexts, however, the indefinite you (meaning “anyone in general”) is inappropriate.

In Ethiopia, you don’t need much property to be considered well-off.

If the pronoun one seems to stilt, the writer might recast the sentence: In Ethiopia, a person doesn’t need much property to be considered well-off.

**To refer to people, use who, whom, or whose, NOT that or which.**
In most contexts, use who, whom, or whose to refer to persons, that or which to refer to animals or things. Although that is occasionally used to refer to persons, it is more polite to use a form of who. Which is reserved only for animals or things, so it is impolite to use it to refer to persons.
When he heard about my seven children, for of whom lived at home, Gil smiled and said, “I love children.”

Fans wondered how an out-of-shape old man who walked with a limp could play football.

**NOTE:** Occasionally *whose* may be used to refer to animals and things to avoid the awkward *of which* construction.

It is a tree whose name I have forgotten.